

The Third Day Phenomenon: Esther's Story

Read Esther 1-5

Haman's loathing of the Jewish people slipped past reasoning and gathered speed toward insanity. Perhaps this animosity was already deep-seated; but when Mordecai the Jew refused to bow down to Haman (who was second in command to the king), that hatred seemed to explode into every cell of his being. So, a plan was needed to exterminate the whole Jewish race scattered throughout the Persian Empire, an empire ruled by King Ahasuerus and his wife, Esther.

It took Haman several days, but when he entered Ahasuerus' quarters, he had a scheme fixed for Mordecai and his people. "It is your best interest, O king that brings me here." Haman kept his voice silky with feigned sincerity. "There are a people who are different from all your other subjects, for they obey their own laws, not yours." The king's face began to blotch with fury, empowering Haman to proceed. "Therefore, if it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that these people be destroyed," he said.

Ahasuerus' fickle and sometimes violent reactions were notorious. He had cast out his first wife because of a minor infraction. And on a whim--though he had merely known Esther, Mordecai's niece, for one night--he had chosen this Jewish woman for his queen without any knowledge of her heritage. Therefore, the king's outburst was predictable: "Do what you want with them!" And the Jewish population was to be obliterated, before a year was complete.

The official letters from Haman was greeted by wailing from the Jews. The command to annihilate them on a specified date, both young and old, even women and children, was proclaimed in every province in the empire. And Mordecai, whose actions had precipitated the plot for the holocaust, could be found outside the king's gate, having replaced his clothing with sackcloth and ashes, and weeping in despair.

"This cannot be!" Esther's reaction to her uncle's distress, when she was informed of his actions by servants, was to writhe in anguish and send new garments. With his refusal came the news of her people's plight. Furthermore, to her alarm, he expected her to go to the king. Mordecai's response was sharp when Esther shrank back in terror of what was demanded of her. She twisted her rings from finger to finger and explained through a servant who raced back and forth with their messages, "Unless the king extends his scepter to me when I enter his court, I am dead."

"You must plead before the king," said Mordecai, "for these are your people. Do not imagine that you can escape any more than the rest of the Jews." Esther became resigned as Mordecai persisted. "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place." With his final words,--"And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"—Esther gave commands for a three day fast before she was to enter the king's courtroom.

Then she said, "If I perish, I perish."

In place of a feast that evening (for this was Passover), a fast began in Jewish homes. Grief and despair were tentatively replaced with hope. Esther could not eat anyway, for she merely had three days before she must appeal to the king. On the third day of the fast, she prepared by donning royal garments: purple robes as soft and light to the touch as the inner feathers of a hen's chick. Esther passed through corridors flanked by

hanging tapestries, proceeding toward the court of the king. Spasms of anxiety kept her pace hesitant, and her breathing trembled.

King Ahasuerus felt a stir in the crowd surrounding his throne. Above a parchment, his eyebrows rose as he peered and finally relaxed his gaze on Esther. The scepter that extended life was held out to one who would rescue her people from death. Deliverance began that day, and, as was common with God's salvation, that day was the third day.

Two previous articles—Abraham's offering of Isaac and David's census—illustrate that God does phenomenal things, in Scripture, on the third day. These events prepare us for the third-day resurrection of Christ. Esther's story has an additional element of foreshadowing. The fast she proclaimed began on Passover, the day Jesus would be crucified and ended on the third day with her facing the king to deliver her people from death, on the same day Jesus would rise from the dead.